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Santa Clara University

**The Effects of Social Media and Apps on Exercise and
Health Habits of Millennial Women**

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English 106: Advanced Writing

Professor Jacquelyn Hendrick

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INTRODUCTION

Exercise and eating healthy have become the next big trends, with new technology and social media allowing them to flourish. It is difficult to avoid this trend when “#fitspiration” is the caption of over 15 million instagram posts and there are hundreds of smartphone applications (apps) focused on health and fitness, that function to track your goals, provide tips or even include full workouts and healthy recipes.

From an early age, girls are exposed to the body ideal when they are given a Barbie and begin to ingrain the thin body ideal and the need and desire to have similar body features (Rice 2016). Now with a growing access to social media, young girls are seeing images of real women obtaining the thin and fit ideal, preaching fitspiration and causing girls to compare their own bodies to the unrealistic body ideals they view (Stapleton 2017). Many of these posts seek to inspire and move away from the thin-ideal but seek a strong-ideal, with captions like ‘Strong is the New Skinny’, but are these posts actually helping girls become strong or simply producing low self-esteem (Boepple 2016, Stapleton 2017)?

Millennial women are also exposed to health and fitness apps. It appears that these apps have a stronger effect on behavior change in regards to health and fitness as compared to social media (Higgins 2016, Yang 2015). However, there is little research about these apps and their effects since the technology is so new. Is it the social media posts that are inspiring people to get fit and healthy or is it the rise in smartphone fitness apps?

It appears that everyone is getting on the health and wellness bus and through my research I want to determine if it is a result of these trends online or if they have no influence.

Are these technological innovations and trends actually encouraging people to get off their asses and instill healthy habits?

Social media and health apps are easily accessible to millennial women. Health and wellness apps and “fitspiration” social media posts seek to accomplish the same goal. Their intentions are to encourage self-efficacy in leading healthy lives and accomplishing their goals by creating a positive environment around exercise and healthy eating.

Social media posts provide inspiring quotes and sometimes exercise guides or healthy recipes alongside images of women of the thin-ideal or athletic-ideal. However, the quotes along with the fitspiration and thinspiration images often contain a negative connotation when they say things like “body goals” indicating that the unrealistic image is the ideal that women should work towards. These photos, often inspire envy of these women more often than motivation and therefore do not assist them in achieving their health goals and can cause an unhealthy relationship with food and exercise (Robinson 2017). Social media posts about “fitspiration” encourage eating disorders and do not alter people's’ exercise or eating habits.

Apps are more effective at keeping people accountable for their exercise and healthy eating habits because they provide reminders, guides and positive encouragement. Smartphone apps like 30 Day Fitness Challenge Pro and Strava: Run, Ride or Swim, although some more effective than others, hold people accountable, provide useful tools and encourage them to exercise and eat healthy.

This leads me to question how can these health and wellness social media stars promotes improving health habits like the fitness apps rather than inadvertently encouraging body dissatisfaction. Social media and technology have strong influences on millennial women, and

therefore it is extremely important that they are moving towards creating positive impacts for the sake of health and wellness of this and future generations.

METHODS

Throughout this article, I will develop the meaning of fitspiration and thinspiration and discuss how they have an inherently negative effects on millennial women. As well as assess various health apps and the reviews they receive, in order to determine their effectiveness. These topics will lay the platform for a discussion regarding the differences and similarities of the influences of fit-ideal social media posts and health apps.

I have conducted my research by evaluating comments on instagrams that fall under the category of “fitspiration” and “thinspiration” as well as reading reviews of health apps. I have also researched and analyzed scholarly sources that address issues related to social media, body image, fitspiration, exercise behavior and fitness apps. Using a psychological theoretical approach to analyze these sources, I have gained insight on how people react to these images and tutorials found online, how they are changing body ideals and if they are effective.

As becoming vegan, exercising daily and eating clean appear to continue to rise, so does the consumption of highly processed foods and sedentary lifestyles (Sandercock 2016), therefore it is important to understand if the technology we are using to better our lives is, in fact doing that. If it isn't, this research will help us better understand what is working, what's not, and how to change our approach to health, food and exercise in order to promote healthier habits.

In order to dive into these topics it is important to define some of these key terms I have already referenced. The thin-ideal (see Figure 1), is a woman who is skinny, with a small waste and little to no fat. Girls are exposed to the thin-ideal at an early age as many play with Barbie

dolls which portray an unrealistic perception of what a woman should look like, i.e. long very thin legs and a teeny waist. Women continually see this thin-ideal in models and on social media platforms. “Thinspiration”, or “thinspo”, is a portmanteau word of thin and inspiration created via social media platforms to celebrate these women who display the thin-ideal and motivate others’ to obtain a thin figure.



Figure 1: Thinspiration (weight_is_a_nightmare 2018)

Figure 2: Fitspiration (body_fitness_fashion 2018)

The fit-ideal (see Figure 2), or athletic-ideal, is similar to the thin-ideal but is more muscular and toned. Social media star and fitness guru Kayla Itsines is a perfect example of the fit ideal. Her abs are very toned, she has a clear thigh gap, has thin arms, exercises regularly and eats healthy. “Fitspiration”, or “fitspo”, is a portmanteau of fit and inspiration and has the intention of encouraging women to obtain the fit-ideal body through exercise and healthy eating habits. It is used often in social media posts along with images of women in exercise outfits,

showing off their workouts and progress towards the fit-ideal. Throughout this paper, I will mostly focus on the theme of fitspiration. I will evaluate how social media posts and health apps exhibit fitspiration and the effects of this trend.

RESULTS

Effects of Fitspiration Social Media Trend

Although social media platforms like pinterest and instagram increase our ability to communicate and share our lives with our friends, families and the world, they also have negative effects on our perspective of ourselves. Social media fosters a negative relationship between one and their social media persona. It often encourages people to compare themselves to the people seen on social media rather than to simply share (Stapleton 2017). The vast network of social media opens up a large venue for people to share and compare their lives which can be detrimental to the individual's self-image.

Body Comparison

When someone is searching through Pinterest and sees #Thinspiration or #fitspiration along with a tall, thin, and fit woman, her first thought is most often how her body conforms to the body-ideal portrayed in the photo. Millennial women have so much access to the world outside of their own bubble because of social media; they often see images of models that encourage unrealistic body ideals. The excessive exposure to these images and "thinspiration" encouragement strengthens the inevitability that these women will compare themselves to the models they see online (Sherlock 2018). The need to be thin is shoved down our throats through blogs, social media, and advertisements at such a young age that it is difficult for women not to compare their body image to others.

Women post before and after photos of their body transformation encouraging the need to compare and become more thin and fit. Although these photos show that these women have used her workouts to gain real results, it causes women to compare themselves to the transformations and bodies of the women in the photos. User kiahbarker22 commented on one of Itsines transformation photos “wow I wish this was me” (kiahbarker22 2018), showing that these transformations photos cause people to compare themselves to the images posted. Fitspiration and thinspiration content serves the express purpose of motivating conformity to a fit and thin appearance ideal. The images are created, posted, shared, and often sought out with the goal of promoting thinness. Their purpose is to motivate and guide self-scrutiny based on appearance. The manner in which they do so is likely to shape, at least in part, the degree to which they induce self-objectification (Ghaznavi 2015, 55). This is frustrating because one would hope these images would have a positive effect; to inspire women to lead healthy lifestyles, but instead these encouragements to be thin and fit leads to self-scrutiny and perfectionism.

When viewing fitspiration images women are not necessarily persuaded to start exercising and eating healthy to become more thin and fit. In the article “Idealised media images”, Robinson and her colleagues studied the impact of “fitspiration” on body image and physical health of 106 college women. In the study, the women were randomly assigned to look at images of women portraying the “thin-ideal”, “athletic-ideal” or “muscular-ideal”. The purpose of this study was to determine the effect these images had on the women's self image and determine if they encouraged them to exercise more often. Robinson and her colleagues came to a similar conclusion about thinspiration and fitspiration as Ghazavi did for thinspiration. The study conducted led to the conclusion that “fitspiration” and “thinspiration” images resulted

in negative body image and fitspiration had no real effect on exercise habits. While the women found the fitspiration images inspiring, there is no evidence supporting an improvement in their exercise habits, and therefore women should avoid viewing these fitspiration images often (Robinson 2017). Lastly, the study indicated that, despite what image they were viewing, many of the women were comparing themselves to the women in the photos, proving that not only does thinspiration encourage negative self-comparison but so does fitspiration and the muscular ideal.

In November 2015, Australian model and Instagram star, Essena O'Neill chose to "quit" social media. After realizing she was unhappy, despite being internet famous and supposedly having "everything", she stopped using social media because she realized it was the root cause of her unhappiness (O'Neill 2015). Since the age of 12, she compared herself to the women she saw on social media and struggled to be happy with her own body. She was constantly feeling inadequate compared to the unrealistic ideals of beauty portrayed in social media as previously discussed. She found validation in the likes and followers she received on photo and admittedly "fell in love with this idea that [she] could be of value to other people", she called it her "snowballing addiction to be liked by others" (McNeal 2015). She chose to end her social media fame because she was not being authentic and did not know who she was without it.

Body Dysmorphia and Dissatisfaction

Thinspiration and fitspiration strive to inspire women to obtain the ideal body, however it does not necessarily inspire them to do so in a healthy manner. In fact, in the article "Bones, Body Parts, and Sex Appeal", Ghaznavi describes thinspiration as "thin-ideal media content (i.e., images and/or prose) that intentionally promotes weight loss, often in a manner that encourages

or glorifies dangerous behaviors characteristic of eating disorders” (Ghaznavi 2015, 54).

Thinspiration is a key aspect of the thin ideal in social media; it encourages unhealthy weight loss and negative self-image. Something that is an inspiration is supposed to have a positive influence on someone’s life; in social media, use of the Thinspiration and fitspiration hashtag can have a false sense of positivity. The results of these so-called inspirational trends encourage women to develop body dysmorphia and to partake in an excessive weight loss habits.

Similarly, social media was a negative presence in O’Neill’s life that caused her to have body dissatisfaction even though she was posting photos of herself with captions like “#Fitspo” as if she believed she was an inspiration to herself and others. In reality she did not possess the fit ideal qualities of eating healthy and exercising regularly because she was participating in unhealthy eating habits and exercising excessively to gain the appearance of fitspiration *goals*. In an article written about Essena on Buzzfeed, she acknowledged that “A 15-year-old girl that calorie restricts and excessively exercises is not goals” (McNeal 2015). The point made from this at large is that, comparing oneself to the images we see online is extremely unrealistic because even these women that we idolize are engaging in the poor habits that consume girls who compare themselves to the women online. It is this horrific cycle that causes women to have body dysmorphia, among other issues related to self-image.

The “selfie” is a major proponent of social media that encourages body dissatisfaction. Selfies are often discussed via the controversy of whether or not they encourage self-love or self-obsession. The positive side of the argument is that they encourage people to be proud of who they are and instill self-confidence. The negative side is that selfies encourage women to objectify themselves and to find their worth in their physical attractiveness particularly compared

to women on social media (Chasler 2017). This side of the argument is alarming because it allows women to find self-worth by comparing their selfies to others on the internet. They can also receive comments that may validate their negative self opinions. One instagram user @Weight_is_a_nightmare posted a photo representing thinspiration (see Figure 1) with the caption “Mom made me eat last night but im going to stick strong this time” (weight_is_a_nightmare 201). This user is associating her worth with her physical appearance and to her the use of #thinspiration justifies her eating disorder. Whether they receive positive or negative feedback, they are still justifying their worth according to the quality of their selfie and their physical appearance. Body dissatisfaction as a result of social media and the selfie have encouraged women to over-evaluate themselves and even furthermore photoshop their photos.

Overvaluation of one's physical image, especially in selfies, is often why young women edit their photos. Essena O'Neill struggled to accept her physical beauty as is and took drastic measures to accept it. She would take an excessive amount of photos in order to get one that is just 'good enough' and even continue to edit and change herself in those photos in order to fit society's standards of beauty, thin-ideal, fit-ideal, etc (O'Neill 2015). While reflecting on social media's influence on her body image, O'Neill said her inner self was pleading with society to “Please like this photo, I put on makeup, curled my hair, tight dress, big uncomfortable jewelry... Took over 50 shots until I got one I thought you might like, then I edited this one selfie for ages on several apps- just so I could feel some social approval from you” (McNeal 2015). This struggle to feel accepted and approved by society is not an uncommon problem, but the way social media heightened O'Neill's need to be liked by society is unhealthy. Particularly

because it is her physical beauty and the images she posted online that determined her worth and gained approval by society.

In order to temporarily fix body dissatisfaction, like O'Neill experienced, millennials use photoshop to edit their photos. Snapchat and Instagram have features that can apply filters to people's photos that enhance their quality and aesthetic. The filters and editing features have a negative connotation because, even though they may make a photo look better, they imply that someone does not look as good without them. In other words, it implies that we are less beautiful naturally. Women will also use apps to slim down their figure in photos. Famous model, Alessandra Ambrosio, has even fallen victim to this. In one of her photos (see Figure 3) it is clear that her thigh has been altered using photo editing (Celebface 2018). The thin-ideal even effects celebrities and models that we expect to be *part of* the ideal. This shows that many people feel that their features alone are not good enough, thin enough or beautiful enough to post online and needs to be edited to *compare* to the other photos shared online.

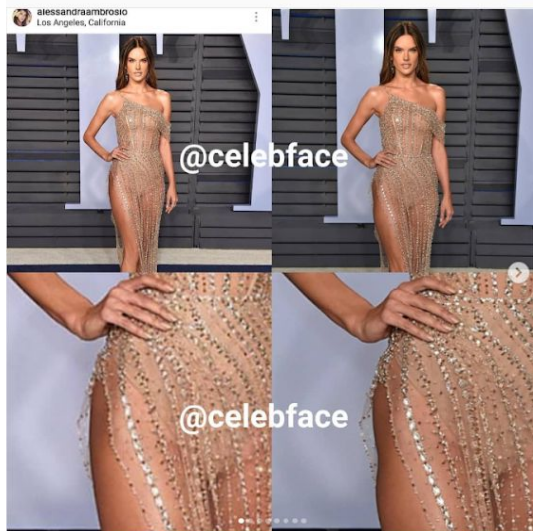


Figure 3: Alessandra Ambrosio Photoshop (Celebface 2018)

Social media encourages people to change how they look on social media when they use hashtags like “#Thinspiration”, “#bodygoals”, and “#fitspo”. These promote an unrealistic idea of what a normal woman’s body should look like which causes body dissatisfaction in viewers of said images. An instagram user, @body_fitness_fashion, posted an image (see Figure 2) representing fitspiration with the caption “Tag a friend who need some workout motivation today... #bodygoals” (body_fitness_fashion 2018). Images like this with captions “encouraging” women to exercise aren’t having the effect they expect. They cause women to compare themselves to the photos. This is clear in the comments when users responds “goals” or “Amazing figure” (iamalicialynn_ 2018, mimigriffin 2018). These posts promise women that it is *easily* achievable to become part of the thin ideal, however it is most often not easy and encourages unhealthy eating disorders like anorexia, excessive exercise disorder, and weight obsessions. There is no doctor-recommended diet that will allow someone to lose weight in 7 days, nor do most of these diets actually work; yet popular social media figures inadvertently encourage women to partake in these aggressive and unhealthy diets.

Social Media and Behavior Change Techniques

Some social media posts incorporate behavior change techniques in order to have a more positive effect on millennial women’s health and exercise habits. These techniques come in the form of providing exercise routines and encouraging women to share their transformations. Behavior change techniques are important in keeping women motivated and held accountable for accomplishing their health oriented goals (Yang 2015). In most cases, this is what social media stars are missing in their fitspiration posts. However, smartphones apps have been more effective in accomplishing behavior change and increasing motivation to become healthy (Higgins 2016).

Analysis of Fitness and Health Smartphone Apps

Moving forward, I will evaluate and analyze various fitness and health apps in order to determine their effectiveness in establishing healthy habits. As well as compare the differences and similarities of the characteristics of the apps to the social media fitspiration posts.

There are many health and wellness apps that millennial women download on their cellphones to become healthy or obtain the fit-ideal body type. There are a variety of options including nutrition, fitness, diet, calories counting, sleeping and recipe apps. These apps also contain functions like reminders, “how to” tutorials and the ability to track your day to day activities or overall progress. I have analyzed two apps, the 30 Day Fitness Challenge Pro and Strava: Run, Ride and Swim, in order to determine what they have to offer and their effectiveness.

30 Day Fitness Challenge Pro

Moving forward I will analyze the 30 Day Fitness Challenge Pro app by Leap Fitness Group. The app offers 30 days of exercises routines for all difficulty levels and meal suggestions, as well as a health tracker and daily reminders to complete your exercises (30 Day). Through my analysis of ratings and comments, I have determined it is an example of a successful health and wellness app.

It was difficult to find a bad review for this specific exercise app. User BlondeGal commented on the versatility of the app “This app is amazing for new beginners! If you are looking for an app to help you get into a routine of exercising or eating healthy, look no further! This is the app!” (BlondeGal 2017). Many other users raved about its ease of use, reminders and positive feedback that held them accountable for completing their daily exercises. User

Madisonm90 gave the app a 5 star rating and wrote that it is “Easy to use and already seeing results on day 9!” (Madisonm90 2018). The study “Effects of gain-versus loss-framed performance feedback on the use of fitness apps” further supports that positive reinforcement and performance feedback do in fact encourage people to reuse fitness and health apps (Lim 2017). This study evaluates the relationship between exercise feedback on exercise app and whether or not the consumer used the app again. The author argues that the positive feedback on the exercise apps did encourage people to use the again and increased self efficacy in relation to exercise abilities. This shows that the comments on the app correlate with effects seen in other studies. The app also received a 4.9/5 rating by 3,408 user ratings (30 Day). Out of the few bad ratings and comments I read, the users were often complaining about advertisements or a software bug in the app, not necessarily the app functions or workouts themselves.

There was an overwhelmingly positive response to this app, however it is possible that those who did not see results or formed positive habits from this app chose not to comment because weight loss and health improvement can be a sensitive topic one may not want to share with the world. On the contrary, some users were willing to discuss their difficulties with exercise and how this app helped them change for the better, User Ren586 wrote “I struggled to get back into exercising and this app gave me the inspiration to begin reaching for my goals. It's like having my own personal trainer in my phone. I love it!” (Ren586 2018). Although many users said they were reaching their goals, most did not clarify what those goals were exactly which makes it difficult to qualitatively prove the effectiveness of the app. Users comments were more vague, for example they did not say they *lost 10 pounds in 2 months* or were *exercising 5 days a week as an improvement from twice a week*. Rather they wrote things like, *I am reaching*

my goals or I am seeing results. As mentioned before, The App also included a meal plan that suggests shopping lists and recipes for all your meals each week. The reviews did not always clarify if the app was improving their eating or exercise habits or both. However, based on the evidence available to me, i.e. these comments and ratings, I came to the conclusion that the 30 Day Fitness Challenge Pro App is successful in encouraging people to exercise, eat healthy and create a habit of both.

Strava: Run, Ride or Swim

Competition is another incentive that many fitness apps use in order to motivate people to exercise often and make a habit of it. The app Strava: Run, Ride or Swim is a fitness app that allows you to track your activity and map the routes you take when you run, bike ride or swim (Strava 2009). It is ideal for those who are competitive in nature and love one to three of the activities in a triathlon. The app analyzes your progress and activity by tracking your speed, distance pace, elevation and calories burned (Strava). It also allows you to publish your performance on their online leaderboard to compare your progress with your friends and followers.

The competitive experience of Strava is one of the main reason that the users love the app and have given it a 4.2 out of 5 rating. User News Man with eyes wrote “Set up your own segment and watch how you rank. This is fun and motivating for me. Also- I love how it keeps track of my mileage YTD (year to date) and I can see how many miles I road at a quick glance” (News 2018). This user gave Strava a 5 star rating and found the competitive nature s of the app and the function to track his bike ride to be extremely appealing. However, not all users were this excited about the app, some thought it lacked certain functions that helped them stay on track

with their exercise goals. User Running Back to Garmin said that the app was great but the function to set goals was lacking. They wrote “I do wish I could set more than just a weekly and yearly mileage goals, being able to reach a pace goal or a run distance would be great for motivation” (Running 2018). This user points out the importance of setting goals that helps to hold people accountable and keeps them on track.

It is possible that the competitive side of Strava could have a negative effect on body image and encourage people to exercise in an unhealthy manner to “beat” other users. However, the comments showed that the competitive nature of the app kept people motivated but did not appear to do so in a way that was detrimental to their mental health. Unfortunately, there is not a ton of research on the negative effects of health and fitness apps so it is difficult to confirm if they have an effect on body satisfaction or cause exercise or eating disorders.

App Comparison

In comparing the reviews of the Strava app to the 30 Day Fitness Challenge Pro app, there are certain characteristics that many users' comments were helpful in motivating people to exercise. Users of both apps praised their ability to track their workouts and see how many calories they burned. Users of the 30 day fitness challenge pro love the ability to set goals and follow workouts, whereas users of Strava said that those functions were missing in the app and believed they would improve the app experience. Both apps also included a daily motivating function. Users of Strava often said that the competition aspect of the app encouraged them to work harder to beat their own record or the times of other users, while the 30 day fitness challenge pro users found the daily reminder made it easy for them to stay on track with their

exercise plan. These comments tell us of the importance of the ability to track your workouts, set goals, have a daily plan and have a motivating factor.

DISCUSSION

The main difference between the social media posts and apps is that social media shows images of the idealized body whereas the apps that were analyzed do not. The apps often show animated figures to show the exercise moves and offer words of encouragement but stray from the trigger words like “fitspiration” and “body goals”. Along the same lines, the comments for apps are more goal-oriented and discuss how motivating and useful the app is. Whereas, the comments on social media posts are less substantive and tend to give praise to the woman in the photo. The apps also give clear instructions on how to keep you healthy and on track with your goals without becoming obsessive and doing it in an unhealthy way.

It is clear that fitspiration and thinspiration images encourage women to compare themselves to an unrealistic body ideal. They often inspire millennials to partake in unhealthy eating and exercise habits to obtain the ideal, cause body dysmorphia or do not improve their health habits at all. Meanwhile, health and fitness apps exhibit fitspiration, in that they inspire and motivate millennial women to exercise and eat healthy in a structured environment, without requiring them to look at the idealized body and comparing themselves to the ideal.

Moving forward, research should focus on the mental effects of apps in relation to body image, similarly to how many studies have focused on the effects of social media on body image. It is also vital to continue researching and testing the effects of health and fitness apps in order to determine how to better implement behavior change techniques to improve the apps.

Health apps are taking a step in the right direction to support women in their transformation to leading healthier and happier lives. Forming a supportive community and fostering a more body positive atmosphere on social media, by celebrating women's bodies instead of encouraging unrealistic body ideals, will lead to a more healthy and happy generation of millennial women.

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